

The Crone role revisited in the migrant Diaspora to Australia

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In mythical tradition as revisited by research during the few last decades, the Crone is the feminine aspect of the ageing individual, she who protects and guides youngsters through her wisdom. Drawing on the darker as well as the more glowing sides of this powerful image, the paper investigates how migrant women in old age are conceptualised by younger Australians of a Mediterranean background. Qualitative data such as recent performance materials, student publications and autobiographical essays point to a shift in perceptions which, beyond challenging stereotypical representations of old females as custodians of tradition, highlight a need to apply new tools to investigating scholarly themes in situations where subjects originate from societies of illiteracy and orality.

Old age, gender and migration: an introduction

Ageing is a sensitive issue in contemporary Western countries. The early post-war era brought to the fore a generation of young people — those who are currently in charge of the affairs of the planet — fascinated with youth in all its expressions; and the consumer society that took shape at the same period identified youth with beauty, creativity, sexuality and the victory over death. With the gradual dissolution of the extended family ageing people became an external accessory of the newly formed nuclear family, and at the last stage of their life some of them tend to be institutionalised in “soothing” surroundings away from the business of daily life (Gomes, 2009: 3–4). New techniques and treatments have been pioneered to reverse the ravages of time and restore lost glories, while intensive scientific research aims to maintain the youthful characteristics of the majority of the population. Anthropology, psychology, sociology and gender studies, meanwhile, have questioned the newly formed eternal youth stereotype, drawing evidence from the oral heritage of both the old cultures and the contemporary Third World, in which concepts of time and age are distinctly different from those that have been favoured by the societies of writing and Western socio-economic realities of the last two centuries.

This paper examines how women in old age, and more specifically grandmothers, are represented in writings and artworks of first and second generation descendants of Mediterranean migrants in Australia. Its theoretical background comprises gender and migrant studies, and Jungian psychology. According to the first, ageing women constitute a specific cultural group with distinct gendered attributes and the collective mental images associated with them lead to a form of invisibility in Western mass-mediated societies on both the material and symbolic level (McCabe, 2004:47–48). According to the second, ageing migrant women are subjected to additional cultural expectations and bias, which may point to double invisibility, and in cultural representations they are portrayed as powerful custodians of ethnic tradition, and/or as bitterly marginalised and vulnerable individuals (*ibid.*; also Anthias, 2004:2). According to Jungian psychology old women, or otherwise Crones, are the feminine aspect of the archetype of the Wise One who guides youngsters in life's bright and dark mysteries (Campbell, 2008:57–59). With the exception of a small number of eponymous myths, fairytales, narratives and storytelling, however — e.g. Hecate, the queen of the dead Baba-Yaga, and also the goddesses Lha Mo and Kali Ma (in ancient Greek, Slavonic-Russian, Tibetan and Hindu traditions respectively) — this has been marginalised by textual culture for centuries. In popular culture, a sinister aspect has been attributed to this archetypal image, which is particularly highlighted in the case of elderly women, presenting them as rather annoying creatures; this confers on them, at best, propensities such as weirdness and eccentricity; at worst, it portrays them as devilish, as shrews and witches. Interestingly enough, whilst culture honours — though reluctantly — the stereotypical images of ageing women who fit the rules of the society they live in, psychology and art consider their divergent attitudes enriching material for the construction of literary or theatrical characters, and particularly rewarding for the development of the psyche of the individual. Moreover, Crones, as well as having lived through all the stages of a woman's life, also embody the legacy, experience and skills of the billions of women who have lived on the planet through the centuries, which makes them something much larger than the images produced within the scope afforded them (and the restrictions imposed on them) by their particular culture (Estes, 2010). Most of them have originated from contexts in which orality rather than written culture was the norm, and thus on the surface at least they have not much in common with Crone-identified women in Western post-war societies, who are both aware of gender subordination and privileged in terms of material resources, education and careers.

In this paper I discuss sources related to representations of Greek, Maltese and Italian grandmothers living both in Australia and the Mediterranean as presented by their grandchildren of first and second generation migrants in Australia. Although these women have different cultural experiences they share a first- or second-hand migratory experience and most importantly the fact that they are illiterate. Research findings confirm this picture. In the mid-1980s Mediterranean women in Australia comprised 8 percent of the female migrant population. They originated mostly from peasant families, had the least and poorest quality schooling and the weakest English

skills, were mostly married and depended on the ethnic communities and informal social networks when looking for jobs, and held low status jobs in the labour market (Evans, 1984:1063–90; Pedraza, 1991:317–18).

These attributes placed them automatically in an invisible societal position, with restricted access to information and valued skills both in their homelands and host-ing countries, present in family commemorative photos almost like icons hung in the background — although, as the survey mentioned above notes, they have been found to possess a variety of undervalued and unpaid skills, such as taking care of children and the elderly, running a household and contributing to the rural economy. As immigrants, they have also shown a notable propensity towards entrepreneurship, running small businesses as extensions of the household and thereby allowing their family to amass capital and achieve social mobility (Evans, 1984:1063–90; Pedraza, 1991:317–18). Overall, they resonate with a world that is distinctly different from that of their children, even more so from that of their grandchildren, who are more or less citizens of the developed world in terms of cultural experience. If their children to a certain extent preserved a facade of respect towards these women, due to the harsh realities that held together the post-war ethnic communities keeping intercultural and interpersonal conflicts out of sight, their grandchildren, more free and confident both in ethnic and non-ethnic settings, already relate to them in ways that fluctuate from playful appreciation (Frantzi, 2009:191) to extreme ambiguity in public.

Data presentation

a. The guardian of tradition

The first source for investigating the topic of ageing Mediterranean women in Australia is drawn from the satirical column “Theia Athanasia’s guide to being the perfect nifi”, which featured in the journal *Hellsoc Hangover*, published by the Greek-Australian students of the University of New South Wales from 2006–2009. In this column an ageing *theia* (aunt) regularly offers her advice to the young female members of the Hellenic Society (Hellsoc) in matters of social conduct, fashion, relationships and most importantly marriage. Marriage advice revolves around a “sacred” system of points through which the girls are tested as future *nifes* (brides), and further as future wives, cooks and cleaners. Their skills are evaluated in a variety of situations: in the church, in family gatherings, above all in the family kitchen, but also in the functions of their ethnic society at the university. Girls are encouraged to exercise and show off these qualities relentlessly with the aim of attracting the *gambri* (grooms) one day in the future. There is a calculating aspect to the pursuit that requires feminine cunning and a raw kind of cynicism (girls are occasionally referred to metaphorically as goats and pigs); and a higher one, which deploys sacrifice, self denial and inner exploration of “the Greek woman within”, who through performance of humble services (such as relentless cleaning and use of the miraculous Windex) can be elevated to the status of a Greek goddess.

Theia despises Australia's climate compared to that of Greece, mentions her village frequently and drops in at her female friends' houses without warning when she finds herself in the neighbourhood. However she pays respect to Australian conventions of politeness in public spaces (saying "thank you" and "you're welcome" in Greek); and although when it comes to premarital relationships she does not understand the notion of a date, she is able to adapt modern women's multitasking to her own standards perfectly. A girl can simultaneously participate in the students' ethnic society, wash the dishes and clean the tables afterwards; a girl can also place her book in front of the ironing board and study for the university while ironing:

[...] don't look like a gourouni [pig] by eating all the vasilopita [Christmas pie] to find the lefta [money], they want to marry good nifs [brides], not animals.

Ama thelis na kaneis practice your skills, when hanging out at Esmes [the student's cafe]... offer to clean the table. It will show all the good Greek doctors and lawyers at uni what a good nifi [bride] you are.

...you can juggle preparing a 10 Christmas lunch, clean your house and perform all your social duties without blinking an eye[...] when I was working as a cleaner, I fixed and sewed all Con's shirts during my lunchbreak.

Do not speak over others in conversations; xero eimaste ellines [I know we are Greeks], but we can be animated without being rude.

Dress and act demurely, you have to leave some things to their imagination. Also don't forget, why would they buy the katsiki [goat] when they can get the feta for free?

(*Hellsoc Oracle*, 2007–2008:38; *Hellsoc Hangover*, 2006: II [5]:4 & [6]:2; 2007: II [8]:3–5 & 2009IV [1]: 8)

The column was first published in the journal anonymously. When a couple of months later one of the texts was republished in another university journal, the main author — a female student — included her name — once — in the form of a note in the next edition, explaining that:

My yiayia [grandmother] is not fluent in English, as you might expect, and no, I don't sit there and translate her words of wisdom into English. This article is in fact the work of ...Theoni Trianta! Yes, Theoni Trianta despite the lack of resemblance is Theia Athanasia.

(*Hellsoc Hangover*, II [8]:5 2007)

The column has been written in broken English, in other words Australian English mixed with the kitchen language common among Greek migrants, and its writing style is influenced by films and stand-up comedy popular among Greek-Australians (e.g. the US-Canadian movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*), but also *Desperate Housewives* (an *Anxious Toulia* from Brighton-le-Sands and a *Desperate Olga* from Mar-rickville — Sydney suburbs frequented by Greeks — are mentioned once each). It is also worth noting that it is perhaps one of the few times that this oral mixed code has ever appeared in print.

b. A universal emblem of migration

In contrast with the caustic representation of the ageing Greek migrant Theia above, through which a whole generation, ethnic tradition and mentality (particularly in gender matters) is playfully criticised by her educated grandchild, performance and paratextual material from *Angela's Kitchen*, staged by Paul Capsis in Sydney in 2010, adopts an approach that pays homage to and (as the performer notes in an interview) honours the spirit of his migrant grandmother. It is an autobiographical one-man show that moves the audience back and forth from the kitchen table in the back streets of inner-city Sydney to the streets of Malta where Angela grew up during the Depression and survived the horrors of World War II, migrating in 1948 at the age of 30 with her five children to join her husband, who worked as a wharfie in Australia (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 November 2010). Along the way, the artist re-enacts his childhood memories, introduces family members in both countries by taking on their roles, shares literal and metaphorical postcards, and above all highlights his special connection with his grandmother and the deep impact that she had on his life. Angela is described as warm, generous and humorous; as a daring individual who had to learn a new language, finish a house, find new friends, face the racism of the neighbourhood, protect her children from bad influences; as a strong woman who made a difference by taking a cleaning job and earning her own income; as the sole person who offered little John continuous emotional support while his parents were away from the house working, and took him with her out into the world of the city and the community — and even that of Europe, to which she never returned. Even her death created a platform for her grandchild to break away from his singing career and test his ability to master new performing skills — those of the writer, the story teller/narrator and the re-enactor of multiple characters — and through this journey to claim his own past, simultaneously shedding light on an ethnicity that even today remains little known in the country. Finally, Angela's story served as a vehicle for people from other ethnicities to share their migratory experience, which, as the actor notes, in the context of today's world elevates his grandma to a representative of a generation and of the global phenomenon of migration (ABC, 2010a; ABC, 2010b1).



Paul Capsis as his grandmother in *Angela's Kitchen*, 2009

c. The guide to survival and a living history

In a peculiar synchronicity with the renewed interest in Crone figures in the diasporic communities of Oceania, another group of ageing Mediterranean women, those who never left their land but have migrant relatives in the region, were revisited by their middle-aged grandchildren in 2010. Christos Tsiolkas, in his essay “My Greek grandma” published in *The Guardian* and in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the occasion of the launch of his book *The Slap* in Europe, follows an affirmative approach to grandparents in praising the unconditional love they bring to today’s family environment. Most importantly, he discovers that his grandma, whom he met twice in his life, although born “on the eve of the twentieth century in an Eastern Mediterranean peasant world” which during her lifetime would be “torn apart by five wars and two dictatorships”, although doomed to illiteracy and the shadows, unaware of distances and unable to read even a local map, possesses an invaluable kind of knowledge. She can retell stories of life that span a near century, delivering a non-academic history: “savage and brutal, beautiful and tender, ugly, comic, tragic and very much alive”. A dark gloomy figure, portrayed without a face in the sketch accompanying the essay in the newspaper, she shared with him experiences of dictatorship, suffering and poverty and taught him how to place food on the table by killing a chicken, a shocking experience that has proved unexpectedly useful in his adult life. She could also teach him: “how to prepare the grapes off for wine”; “ways of drying tobacco”; “how to tend a vegetable crop and build a shelter”; and a heap of other important stuff, both big and small, that he missed out on because of her absence in his Australian life (*The Guardian*, Christos Tsiolkas, 2010).

d. The gatherer of tears

Finally in the one-act play *La Casa di Signori* staged by Nigel Kellaway in Hobart in 2010, the Tasmanian performer Maria Mastrocola recalls in the first person her journeys back to San Domenico, her grandparents’ village in Italy, a community in which she is able to discover the meaning of death, femininity and the role of ageing females in the maintenance of the emotional balance of families that twentieth-century migration has dispersed around the globe:

I look around and see an old woman sitting on a chair in a dark room. Flies circling. She smiles a toothless smile. I go to her and I look into her sunken eyes. I kiss her cheeks and sit next to her. She strokes my hand and doesn’t take her eyes from me. She rocks. She does not speak words, she just mumbles and groans. (Mastrocola, 2010:8)

Her Nonna, described by the performer as “just a face in the window, sitting there, watching the world, doing the rosary and saying her prayers” (ibid. 5), performs a peculiar ritual every time a family member departs for the other side of the world. She lights a candle, pulls out her rosary beads praying to St Christopher, gathers the tears of the family in empty bottles, places a cork on each one, climbs a ladder of chairs

placed one on the top of the other, and locks the bottles way up high in a cupboard. She then makes her migrating son promise that he will never forget his culture; and after his departure, when she feels sad for her missing relatives, she opens a bottle of tears and cooks up a big bowl of pasta to celebrate them and their new land:

Music 4.50 (voice) And with this my nonna was silent no more. I saw her face... so open and grotesque in its pained beauty. And her history was there in every line of her face ... ready to tell its story it had held back for so many years. We were leaving again. There would never be another goodbye, and we all knew it. (Ibid. 11)

In doing this, she accords the grief ritual, so central in Mediterranean culture and so exiled in contemporary societies, the role that it deserves; that of an emotional catharsis that through transmutation of tears to food assists the continuation of daily life, memory and cultural bonds.

Discussion and findings

Old female migrants are a complicated topic for discussion. Their case brings to the fore a series of core and cross-cutting issues in scholarly discourse: old age, ethnicity/class, and gender. Old age, due to the proximity to death and the obligations that implies for busy youngsters; ethnicity/class, due to the current preference not to address this nexus directly, but rather to neutralise it under the noble notion of culture, especially in the prosperous old multicultural societies, such as those of the US and Australia; and gender, due to the limited information that traditional ethnic communities are willing to contribute in the analysis. As recent research in gender studies claims, women are always expected to reproduce nation and ethnicity in different and more rigid ways than men (Anthias, 2004:2). They also continue to undertake the role of the carer both in the migrant family/community and in the labour market of the hosting countries (Caritas, 2010:3–9). On the surface they appear to respond happily to these expectations, as both caring and reproduction of ethnicity provide a sense of belonging and also power. On the other hand, their (usually peasant or working class) origins and consequent relegation to unpaid or underpaid domestic work tend to be hushed up in the context of the younger generations's pursuit of success and higher rungs on the social ladder in the hosting countries. Further to that, their participation in the transnational families of two or more cultures, while enriching their world experience, involves particular hardships and psychosocial conflicts that older generations of migrants have left unspoken, not processed properly or even recognised as such (Damousi, 2011:7–25).

Like the majority of migrants, women, especially those who live long and age in foreign lands, are willing or forced to forget, and their forgetfulness has a certain price. Therefore it is no surprise that gender issues in the intensity with which they appear in the core cultures are not raised directly in the diasporic communities, not only among the old generation of — usually poor — female migrants, but also among

their more prosperous and educated children and grandchildren. The latter may not even be aware that matters of forced sex, domestic violence and discrimination could not easily be articulated — much less reported — by women dependent on husbands and possibly in arranged marriages, if they involved the risk of deportation; and that they could be easily silenced under the fear of exclusion from the community when considered a threat to its ethnic pride. Young people of immigrant heritage may also be not aware of their descent from the most numerous proletariat in the history of the planet: that of the poor classes of the traditional societies who in the course of the last two centuries moved to the developed ones. Nor is it appreciated that individual and collective progress is not always to be measured by external cultural standards, but rather by the literal or symbolic distance individuals and groups have to cross during a lifespan from the original point of departure to their destination; a distance that differs from person to person and leaves different marks on the consciousness and psyche.

The sources presented here reveal a different approach to age, gender, ethnic and social stereotypes. Ageing people in them do have a message to convey regarding memory and cultural bonds, but what they mostly have to offer and pass down to youngsters is a variety of practical, emotional and spiritual skills. The way the recipients of this knowledge evaluate these skills depends on their age, gender, formal or informal education, perspective and life experience. The student author of *Theia Athanasia's* guide is a second generation descendant of migrants, female, formally educated and a member of an age group that is still dependent on family yet rebellious against authority values, striving to form a sense of individuality whilst subjected to strong influences by peers in educated surroundings. She delivers a caricatured portrait of ageing women in the local diaspora, an epitome of conventionality and conservatism, serving as a carrier of outdated social, ethnic and gender stereotypes. In archetypal terms this figure is the petrifying senescent force, who functions as:

‘the conveyor of attitudes’[...] ‘one-sided in some way’[...] the rigid keeper of collective tradition, an enforcer of the unquestioned status quo, the ‘behave yourself; don’t make waves; don’t think too hard; don’t get big ideas; just keep a low profile; be a carbon copy; be nice even though you don’t like it, it doesn’t fit, it’s not the right size, and it hurts.’ (Estes, 1992:226–7)

She is the co-dependent shadow Crone who provides incorrect or harmful guidance to the Maiden, leading the latter — for good reasons — to rebel and to ridicule her. The author’s perspective is in direct accord with current popular criticism of old Mediterranean matriarchs of immigrant background that pokes fun and denies them status as role models for young generations. There is a strong message for migrant families here about the distortions and inner conflicts that traditional ethnic values impose on their members. Analysts warn that both the Dry Old Woman (*ibid.*) and the suffocating matriarch, like their mythological counterparts the bitter old maid and the wicked witch, are not limited to the subjects that bear their attributes. They can be also found in the psyche of both the male and female members of the family

and further to that in the collective psyche of the ethnic community. In this respect Theia Athanasia is a shadowy figure in the psyche of her grandchild, and the public exposure of her questionable wisdom constitutes a liberating act for both her female descendant and for the culture this Crone represents.

On a different note, works that highlight the positive aspects of the Crone have been created by artists/intellectuals who are middle aged descendants of the first generation. These attributes point to increased sensitivity and compassion in cultural and age matters, and empathy with societies of orality. Their Crones are female mentors who know from experience what life, death, survival and intimacy are about. They are vulnerable and tough, domineering and humble, sheltering and provocative, rooted and eccentric. They are in accord with Jung's primordial mana energy/personality who assists youngsters in growth, self-actualisation and spirituality (Jung, 1969:33; Campbell, 2008:57–59). They are:

[...] 'the madrinhas, who protect the life of the soul' [...] 'thicker with deeper roots' [...] 'the truth-tellers who in the gathering of the years test what is underneath and behind things' [...] 'making sure that the child has the right experiences, the ones that the culture steals.' (Estes, 2010)

They also possess knowledge and an education which, although undervalued, is peculiarly missing in our literate societies. Oral learning processes and states of consciousness, as noted by researchers, do not lack in sophistication, and the rural/oral cultures that produce them are cultures in their own right. They are situational and interactional, empathetic/affective and participatory, agonistic and additive (Ong, 2002: 37–45). They have their own emotional intelligence, breathing/body and rhythm patterns, knowledge organisation, information management and storage practices. Because they rely extensively on memorisation, memory is a focal point in their personal and collective thinking processes, and, as the sources presented indicate, is transmitted and distilled in conscious and subconscious modes in the psyche of the youngsters.

By taking up the role of the absent fathers and mothers in migrant working families, the female representatives of these old societies constitute very powerful alternative role models, despite the fact that family/communal settings, the hosting culture, political economy, statistics, scientific research and modern psychology have long kept them in the shadows. The fact that the two powerful Crones I have presented (Theia Athanasia and Angela) are identified with, re-enacted, and "channelled" (ABC, 2010b2) by their grandchildren in front of large audiences indicates a huge psychic load, the release of which satisfies a mutual need. The need for the grandmothers' untold and invisible stories to be at last spoken and seen, and the need of their grandchildren to borrow their personas in order to pay respect to their own origin and assert themselves. Either way, Crones' impact is part of a creative force which challenges stereotypical representations of old females and feeds both the ongoing history of migration and the scholarly study of oral societies with new tools and narratives.

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